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‘Lantern in a Poet’s Garden’ sure to please

Musician/composer Terry Tucker shines more than light on the poet’s garden. On her latest CD, she provides a triumphant renaissance for poems penned by two prominent Jefferson County residents more than a century ago with songs that alternately tug at the heart’s strings and inspire one’s own spirited romp in the woods. “Lantern in a Poet’s Garden” is classical music spun with words that dazzle, and it is nothing short of brilliant.

A long time resident of Shepherdstown, Terry began the project nearly a decade ago, when a friend gave her copies of poems by Danske Bedinger Dandridge. Terry recalls being so captivated by Danske’s words that she stayed up all night composing the music to seven of the poems. It was a gut-wrenching experience, Terry remembers: “Sobbing as I played music that just kept flowing from my heart.” Years later, after reading the poems of Daniel Bedinger Lucas, Danske’s cousin, Terry composed music for two of his works, also included on the CD. She went back to Danske’s poetry and decided on the final two songs for the album which was released a few weeks ago.

The Bedinger kin had deep roots in Jefferson County. Both were prolific poets. Daniel, born in 1836, was a lawyer who served, at different times, as a judge and state legislator. Danske was born in 1854 and spent the first four years of her life in Copenhagen. Her father, Henry Bedinger III, a native of Jefferson County (then Virginia), was serving as U.S. ambassador to Denmark. Despite her private schooling in other states, Rosebrake, a historic estate just south of Shepherdstown, was home for most of her life. She was an avid gardener and diarist and published two books of poetry during her lifetime.

From the hundreds of poems by these prolific writers, Terry chose those that spoke to her in a most intimate way. Early on, she realized a common bond with Danske — a love of nature that goes beyond the garden and into the woods of fairies and sunlight mystically streaming patterns around great-limbed trees. A native of Webster County, W. Va., Terry similarly spun her own childhood dreams amid the gardens, the mountains and the woods. She studied classical music at Wesleyan College in Buckhannon and has traveled far and wide for a variety of musical experiences, as a lyricist, composer, and performer. At home with just about any genre of music, Terry most often is called a “folkie.” Although her first passion was classical music, it is the folk music of Appalachia “that’s in my blood,” she says with pride.

It’s no surprise, therefore, that the music in “Lantern in a Poet’s Garden” is classical, and the voice is folk. Classical folk — it’s about the only similarity among the 11 songs, written in nine different keys, and just about as many major as minor voices. Terry plays the piano on all 11 songs, and 9 other local musicians perform on different cuts. Here a flute, there an African drum, a trombone, French horn, trumpet and strings — violin, cello, bass. Terry also sings all the songs, joined on many by Ardyth Gilbertson. The two women have been singing together a long time. In this CD, their harmony soars pitch-perfect to new heights, seeming, over and over again, to rise to the urgency or fantasy of the words.

In “Sympathy,” for instance, Terry solos into a falsetto higher than her usual alto, portraying the poet stoically reflecting her sadness. The softer-voiced mezzo-soprano, Ardyth, joins in almost as a lithesome echo when the first two stanzas are repeated. It’s as if Ardyth IS the other person in the poem, understanding and supportive. The voices glide beautifully together, poignant and resolute.

The women team up again in “The Fairy Camp,” a whimsical song that zooms along at tongue-twisting speed. In “The Stream and I,” Ardyth’s voice comes in briefly and at no more than a whisper — again, a brilliant contrast, perfectly suited to the mood of the poem where the “stream and I” are, perhaps, one entity. Ardyth takes the lead on “Dreams”, and Terry takes the low road, back to alto territory. Her background notes add a subtle richness to one of Danske’s more upbeat poems.

Terry solos in “Folly-Land,” a reminiscence of a carefree childhood and prodding to return there (with, perhaps, her lover by her side). “The Struggle,” by contrast, is an anguished cry for death in no uncertain terms: “Body, I pray you, let me go!” Again, Terry solos from the heart, this time with a beautiful falsetto that cries for relief as much as the poet’s message. It is, perhaps, the strongest song on the album because the composer/singer has followed the poet into metaphysical territory.

“My Heart is in the Mountains” is a perfect ending for the album. The poem by Daniel Bedinger Lucas is celebratory. Terry adds her own tribute to the mountains by composing the music to the finale in a major key, away from the sadness and heaviness of some of the earlier poems. The album over all is a journey into the soul of Danske Dandridge. It could be a journey into the soul of Terry Tucker as well. —by Judy Jenner